



The Australian National University  
**Institute of the Arts**



**Canberra School of Art**

**GRADUATE DIPLOMA of ART**  
**1994**

**Christine James**

**REPORT**

**PRESENTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE  
GRADUATE DIPLOMA OF ART**

ABSTRACT:

NATURE: research into the history of the White Australian relationship with nature. The research paper explores the notion of commodification of nature in historical documents from a particular site. A study taking the form of an exhibition of oil paintings exhibited at the A.N.U. Drill Hall Gallery from August 3 to 21, 1994 which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component (70%) together with a Research Paper (30%), and a Report which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken.

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction   | 2  |
| Contemporary Landscape Issues                        | 3  |
| Mapping, Scientific Notations, Landscapes - drawings | 4  |
| Details of the Works and Working Methods             | 7  |
| Between Text, Art and the Studio                     | 9  |
| Conclusion   | 12 |
| Original Proposal                                    | 13 |
| Curriculum Vitae                                     | 15 |
| Bibliography   | 17 |
| Acknowledgements                                     | 19 |



# CONTENTS

|  | PAGE      |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>  | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>The Landscape Painting Tradition</b>                            | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Landskip/Landscape</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>The Romantic Landscape Genre</b>                                | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Mapping, Scientific Notation, Landscape - <i>descriptio</i></b> | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Details of the Works and Working Methods</b>                    | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Between Plein-air and the Studio</b>                            | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>Conclusion</b>  | <b>12</b> |
| <b>Original Proposal</b>   | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Curriculum Vitae</b>  | <b>15</b> |
| <b>Bibliography</b>  | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>  | <b>19</b> |

## INTRODUCTION.

The works presented for this course are three series of paintings based upon aspects of the environmental and cultural history of Lake George. This lake is located half an hour (by car) to the north-east of Canberra.

It is an intermittent lake, drying up altogether for years at a time according to the climatic conditions of the region. Its waters are considered to be unfit for human or animal consumption. It is, however, the breeding site for thousands of black swans and many other waterbirds, including at least two endangered species of duck during its wet years.

The part of the lake that I chose to work from primarily from two of these series is the south-western end (near Bungendore) where the waterbirds nest each year. Here, where they are sheltered (partially) from the icy western winds, and where the winter sun first meets the lake, they huddle in long densely populated rows, make their nests, and feed on yabbies and worms in the shallow waters.

This population of nesting birds resemble animated crotchets and quavers on a musical score - the sleeping swans like minum rests ( which in musical notation are a shallow, black rectangular bar), whilst the feeding swans look and sound like the bass clef. It seemed to me in the weeks that I spent making visual notations and observing the birds that this was their place. I was but an uninvited and curious visitor.

At the southern end of the lake are several sand mines. The Bungendore residents say: "Canberra stands on Bungendore Sands" (Bungendore Sands being the name of one of the sand mining companies). This sand has been used in much of the construction of Canberra, probably including the construction of our own home and landscaping.

From the escarpment near Smith's Gap (at the southern end of the lake near Bungendore), a panoramic view of the lake basin and the hills beyond presents itself. This view clearly reveals the geometric dividing up of the earth's terrain since White settlement of the Lake George basin. Not only are there paddocks for livestock grazing and cattle, but also plantings of long lines of pine trees as wind breaks, and rectangular excavated pools of water, surrounded by man-made hills of sand left by the sand mines.

So, what is it that I find so enigmatic about this place? What is it that compels me to respond to this place?

When I first saw Lake George in 1985, the lake was quite small, and appeared so low and flat to the earth that it seemed like a mirage. I was fascinated and inspired by the breadth of sky visible here, and the long low, almost level crest of the western escarpment, stretching away from us to the south for miles. The snow clouds that day were very low, rolling as fast as we were travelling. They were snow clouds, with the eerie bright light that snow clouds cast.

I felt distinctly disoriented, for it seemed to me as if here the sky resembled the rolling waves of the Pacific Ocean, beside which I had spent so much of my life, and the lake has assumed the role of the sky, which it reflected hazily in the distance. The topography here appeared to be of a low-lying flat land, and yet we were close to the Snowy Mountains. It was like a dream, this pale, cold place. To that dream I always return whenever I visit the lake - whether that dream is my own or its own I do not know. But I do know that it affects many others in this same way.





'Waterbird Staccatô - Winter VI'

## THE LANDSCAPE PAINTING TRADITION.

In recent years, and particularly since the Australian Bicentenary, there has been much debate about the ways we (Whites) have depicted this land, and what these modes of representation have revealed about our cultural and environmental history.

In Australia, contemporary artists such as Narelle Jubelin, Fiona MacDonald, Susan Norrie, Caroline Williams, Pat Hoffie (to name but a few) have all produced challenging works which question the ways that we have represented nature traditionally. These works subvert the predominantly male history of Australian landscape painting (apart from those watercolour sketches made by women which were to be shared only with the close circle of family and friends).

Writings about the representation of nature which I have found compelling and challenging critique the socio-political aspects of European traditions of landscape painting, and link this landscape painting tradition with scientific art practices, such as surveying, mapping, topographical drawings, and natural history illustration.\*

Essentially, these texts argue that it is no coincidence that landscape painting has enjoyed the popularity that it has in Australian culture. After all, wasn't the idea of the land as a repository of possible wealth (and a place to deposit their convicts) all that the Australian continent represented to the English when they colonized it? In each of these genres, aspects of nature became objectified as various kinds of desirable commodities. The land was to be discovered, surveyed, owned and "cultivated". The flora and fauna were to be found, "named", described and collected (and wherever possible, sent back to England). The pre-existing knowledge accumulated by the indigenous peoples and their usage of this land was ignored. The canons of English systems of knowledge were applied over this land in order to acquire and contain it. Under this hegemony of cultural transposition, the indigenous qualities of the land became either commodified or eradicated. Such issues clearly illustrate the dichotomy in which the "Green" movement finds itself today - the legacy of these ideals - humanity versus environment.

Hence, the need to portray nature in the late twentieth century is surely more crucial than ever before. I do, however, feel strands of continuity with the traditional and historical genres of landscape painting. Through my own works, rethinking colonial, and late twentieth century environmental issues has been an ongoing process. I found the need to introduce visual devices into the paintings, so that these two aspects of; on the one hand **landscape**, and the other, the current state of our **wildlife reserves**, could be in dialogue, and sometimes debate, with each other. Devices such as depictions of the manmade elements at the site, and painterly allusions to the language of surveying, mapping elements, and grids undermined in the paintings the otherwise seamlessly poetic vision of the landscape.

\*See Barrell, John. *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place - 1730-1840*. Cambridge Press, London. 1972.

Bull, Gordon. *Taking Place: Early Colonial Topographical Landscape Views of Sydney 1788-c.1820*. Thesis for M.A. (Hon) Department of Fine Arts, Uni. of Sydney. 1989.

Carter, Paul. *Living in a New Country*. Faber & Faber. London, 1992. ch.2

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McCormick, T.(ed) *First Views of Australia 1788-1825* Longueville Pub., Sydney 1987. See Gordon Bull's paper, *The Development of Topographic Painting*. pp 24-28.



## LANDSKIP/LANDSCAPE

(or) 'All the Language within our Fower seas cannot find it a Name, but a borrowed one'

**landscape** an extensive area of scenery as viewed from a single aspect. *landskip* (originally a term in painting), from Middle Dutch *lantscap* region related to Old English *landscipe* tract of land, Old High German *lantscap* region\*

Through these ideas I became interested in how landscape painting became prominent in England prior to the British circumnavigation and subsequent colonization of Australia. It is recorded by the English that the genre known and accepted so readily by Australians throughout their history as "landscape" was in fact not a developed English native tradition at the time.# Painters such as the Dutch artist Hendrick Danckerts, came to England from the Hague to undertake commissions by the Crown to paint topographical views in oil and tempera. Other artists who worked in England for a considerable period included Czech-born Wenceslaus Hollar, and the Van de Velde family, Willem I, Willem the younger (WillemII), and his brother Adriaen who were employed for their skills as naval painters.

In this period, landscape paintings were also, ironically, linked with the decorative baroque tradition of wall-painting. Landscapes, like portraits, became part of the design of the **grand** interiors of the aristocracy, whose 'supremacy' (or privilege) they glorified. Often they were painted as wall panels, but they were also incorporated as decorations over doors and fireplaces. These early "English" landscapes (and seascapes) were invariably views of towns and cities both inside and outside England in which the Crown had a vested interest, views of "the houses of the King", visual documentations of sea battles, and other 'suitable' sites in England.+

My own works refer to this Dutch origin of the English landscape painting tradition. These works include 'Waterbird Staccato - Winter IV & V', and the multi-panelled work, 'Transposition'.\*\*

When I made these works, I wanted to use the restrained palette (sepia and blue) of the Dutch topographical drawings. In these works, however, I added pictorial devices such as the oblique fencelines, and detailed renderings in the foreground of noxious weeds, which parody the invasion of this site by a foreign 'army'.

In particular, I had looked at 'View of Courtrai' (1667) which had been drawn by the Flemish artist Adam Frans Van Der Meulen when he was housed at the Gobelins tapestry factory. This work is considered to be one of four views made by the artist of Courtrai, which depict this town before, during and after its capitulation to French troops in 1667. This war was known as the War of Devolution.++

Like Holland, the topography of the lake basin is remarkably flat. The water/earth ratio is constantly in a state of flux; between dry periods when the earth is solid, and wet periods, when it is in a state of sedimentary suspension in the lake's waters. Even the colours of the land, which is largely treeless, for most of the year resemble the faded sepia washes of many of the Dutch and Flemish topographical and panorama drawings, engravings and paintings of the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.##

Fearnleigh L. Montagu's painting of the site of Canberra, 'Duntroon House' (c.1870)\*\*\* echoes Dutch landscape painting with its flattened topographical features of the Monaro and its brown,



'View of Courtrai' c.1667





'Waterbird Staccato - Winter IV'





'Waterbird Staccato - Winter V'

treeless plains, juxtaposed with the finely worked details of light on the hilltops, and in the foreground the long lines of fenced enclosures, and Duntroon House with its outbuildings, which lend the painting a narrative content. The predominantly brown and blue hues of Montague's landscape also recalls the Dutch palette.

- \* Hanks, Peter. Ed. Collins Dictionary of the English Language. Wm Collins Pub., Sydney, 1979.
- # Whinney, M. and Millar, O. English Art 1625-1714. The Oxford History of English History of English Art. Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1957. See the chapter, Landscape Painting and the Lesser Genres, which begins: In a letter to Archdeacon Nicolson of 10 November 1699 John Evelyn wrote disparagingly of 'our English paynters, who, greedy of getting present money for their work, seldom arrive to any farther excellency in the art than face-painting.'
- and:  
In the early century Norgate could write of landscape painting that it was 'an Art soe new in England, and soe lately come a shore, as all the Language within our fower Seas cannot find it a Name, but a borrowed one, and that from a people that are noe great Lenders but upon good Securitie, the Duch'
- + See above, p.262. Henry Peacham had published his "Gentleman's Exercise", in which he included his selection of the best site for the landscape painter in England. .
- \*\* See the 'Transposition' section of this report.
- ++ 'View of Coutraï' reproduced from the catalogue - See, Farr, Dennis and Bradford, William. The Northern Landscape. Flemish, Dutch and British Drawings from the Courtauld Collections. Trefoil Books Ltd., London. 1986.
- ## See also the 'Bungendore Sands' section of this report.
- \*\*\* 'Duntroon House, Canberra' c.1870, by Fearnleigh L. Montagu. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

## THE ROMANTIC LANDSCAPE GENRE

My original proposal made reference to several landscape genres, such as the Panorama, the Sublime, the Romantic and the Pastoral Arcadia.\* At the time, my ideological position with these landscape traditions was a critical one, based on the theory that their inherent meanings and associations were simply devices which implicated them with colonial plunder, etc.+ Yet I was interested in how many of the characteristics of the lake had been embodied in these traditions - its vastness, its mutability, the theatricality and chaotic nature of the elements of water and wind, and the grand opera of its skies.

That the Romantic as a tradition may have contemporary relevance is obvious in the works of North American painters such as April Gornik and Joan Nelson whose works were included in the exhibition, 'Romance and Irony' held in the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1989. These artists engage their works with the Romantic in ways that assume new meanings in the late twentieth century, in part because of Romanticism's metaphorical associations historically, but also because of the self-conscious questioning humankind is faced with today regarding our relationship with the environment.#

In my own paintings, however, I have negotiated a relationship with the Romantic genre in a more complex way. The paintings allow the Romantic tradition to transmute into traditions of scientific language so that the painting becomes a field for dialogue. Views of the waterbirds using the lake as their breeding ground become layered behind, beneath or in front of mathematical data compiled from the site - drifts of contour lines and veils of grid lines from a map, ellipses of dragged paint and white surveyors' circles.





'Duntroon House, Canberra' c.1870

In all of my paintings, my use of pictorial devices such as the language of surveying, mapping, and scientific notation stand in for the action of our culture upon the landscape. With the 'Waterbird' series, their tiny size (approximately 8" by 9 or 10") reminds the viewer of the fragility of the situation for our indigenous wildlife - how much longer will their breeding ground remain a viable one for them?

\*See - Bonyhady, Tim. Images In Opposition. Australian Landscape Painting 1801-1890. Oxford Uni. Press, Melbourne 1985.+See previous section, The Landscape Painting Tradition.

#See Grachos, Louis. Romance and Irony In Recent American Art. Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1989.

## MAPPING, SCIENTIFIC NOTATION, LANDSCAPE - *DESCRIPTIO*

Mapping and landscape collide with each other historically. Svetlana Alpers claims that this is 'no coincidence'.\* Alpers proposes that in sixteenth century Holland, **mapping**, a scientific language, and **landscape**, a language of visual art, were once so closely related that their creators and their audience thought of both of them under the same term: *descriptio*.

How could this be? Alpers suggests that the aim of Dutch painters and mapmakers was the same - to gather as much information as possible of the world and reproduce this on a surface. She argues that although our contemporary perspective separates maps and landscapes by their appearance:

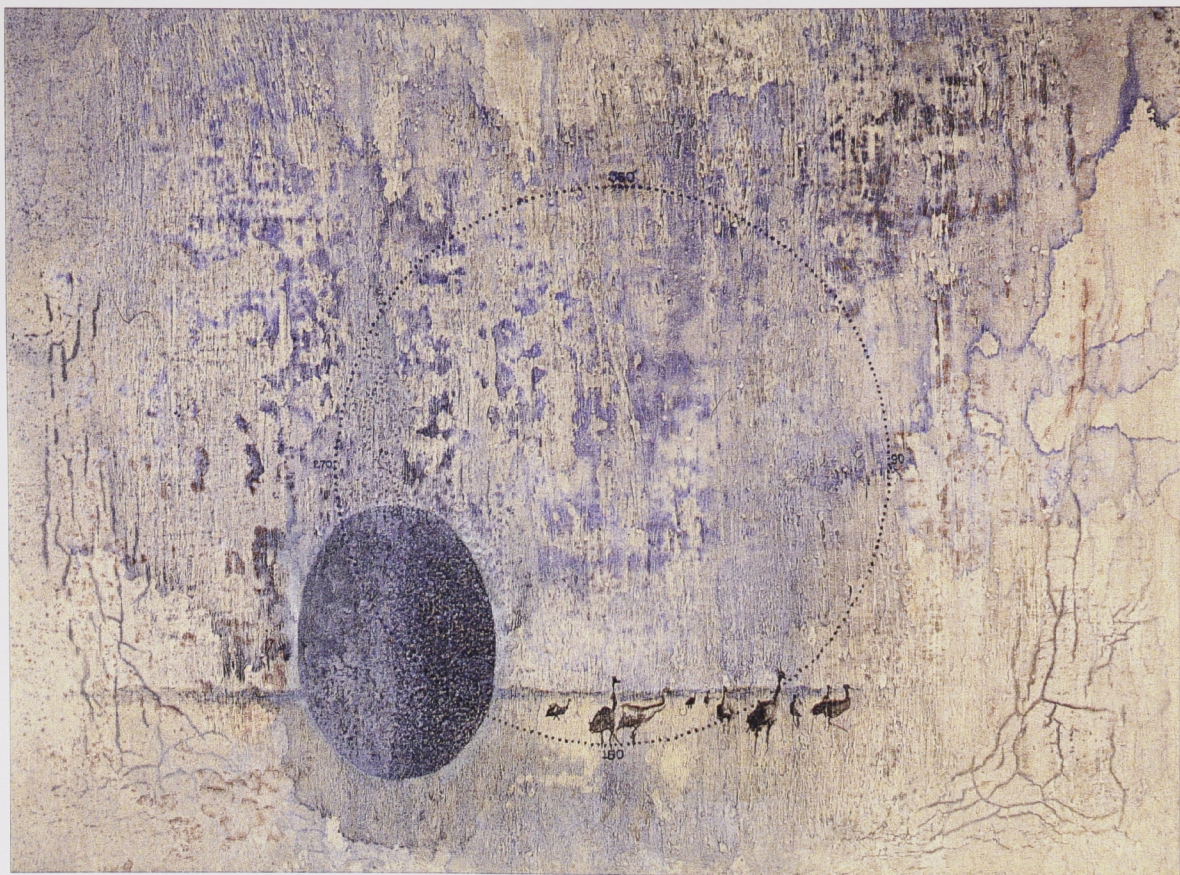
It is often said that a fondness for topographical views and topographical details made maps more like what we think of as pictures. A horizon was not an uncommon thing on a map..... Astronomy, world history, city views, costumes, flora, and fauna came to be clustered in images and works around the centre offered by the map. The reach of mapping was extended along with the role of pictures, and time and again the distinctions between measuring, recording, and picturing were blurred.

In my own works there is also this blurring, pictorially, between two different visual languages (as we think of them in the contemporary world). The painting, 'Lake George Natural History' is like a template; a painterly simulation of old parchment, which mixes the languages of measuring (as in the surveyor's circle), natural history (as in the full-frontal depiction of the emu egg), and landscape (here reduced to depict the emu species, now extinct from Lake George). Some sites I have used to depict the lake from are also important scientific sites. Both of the paintings, 'Descriptio' and 'View to the West from an Abandoned Shoreline' depict the view from a midden which is located on the top of a hill quite a long distance from the lake on a property on the eastern side. The midden has been fenced and demarcated as a prehistoric site by the Prehistory Faculty of the ANU. This painting consists of an elongated panoramic view which I saw and photographed from there.

Ross Coventry's Ph.D. thesis, Abandoned Shorelines of Lake George,+ contains a scientific drawing of the same view, which he captioned 'Viewed from a hill to the east'. This image is a finely rendered topographical drawing which depicts the long almost uniformly level of the western escarpment, and the lake lying flat and low beneath it and the eastern hills. I chose to elongate the format by reducing the foreground of the panoramic photographs from which I worked, so that I could convey the breadth and the narrow format of the land's features in Coventry's topographical drawing .

I began this work by pouring small areas of transparent brown and blue washes alternately, which covered most of the painting surface. Into this gestural composition, the view is centrally placed





'Lake George Natural History'





'Descriptio'





'View to the West from an Abandoned Shoreline'



so that it is suspended, contained subtly into the elongated oval which was a popular framing device used to enclose colonial views.

The brown areas of wash outside of the oval are worked into with a rag and a mixture of brown paint mixed with encaustic wax. These areas resemble the marble-like sedimentary layers of the lake bed. Over these stains are painted fragments of scientific drawings which have been made of the site, which 'define' the topography into simplistic lines and geographic types; and with the dotted arrows and lines used on scientific maps to define the geographical and topographical areas, or to demarcate the journeys of various White explorers.

Sometimes, the very first marks that I make on the surface allude to the surveyors' circle. In other works, such as the medium-sized canvasses, I may incorporate parts of the map at later stages. There are grids and contours of the map which occur in the works obtusely, in the form of wax laden marks which form a dominant cage over the dissolving forms behind, and grids which are subtle; layered behind a blue section of sky, like a decomposed lace veil. I have used photocopy transfer in some works as their starting point. The faded, blurred quality of this method of printing created an ephemeral quality which I decided to work with. In one work, I machine-stitched over parts of the contour lines of the transferred map image, and over the grid of the map, then stretched and primed the canvas with clear emulsion, and developed that painting in response to this stitched pattern.

\*See Alpers, Svetlana. *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century*. Penguin, Middlesex. 1989. pp.119-159 *The Mapping Impulse in Dutch Art*.

+See Coventry, Ross. *Abandoned Shorelines of Lake George*. Ph. D Thesis. Menzies Library. ANU.

## **DETAILS OF THE WORKS AND WORKING METHODS.**

The works presented for this course are all paintings executed in the medium of oil paint. I have used stretched and primed canvas and linen for the smaller paintings, and prepared wooden panels for the three longest paintings.

The gestation of these works has grown from works on paper, photographs (including composite panoramic series), maps, and historical material.

### **Initial Attempts.**

I began by making small oil paintings, which were derived from photographs I had taken in the previous year. I felt dissatisfied with these paintings because they seemed to be either too didactic or too vague. This series of paintings includes 'Inland Sea to Fat Grazing Land', 'Algal Blooms in the Winter Mist', and 'Where Lycett Sketched the Rocks Weep'.

Working from photographs with which I was by then quite familiar felt restricting. These photographs had been taken during my first visits to the lake, when I had been unsure what aspects of the environment I would be painting.

### **Plein-Air (being there)**

Did I respond to this 'inland sea' in the same way that I respond to the Pacific Ocean? Why does our culture participate in the national recreation of visits to the beach? What is it about the ocean's waters that we enjoy so much, and why do we walk for miles along the water's edge?



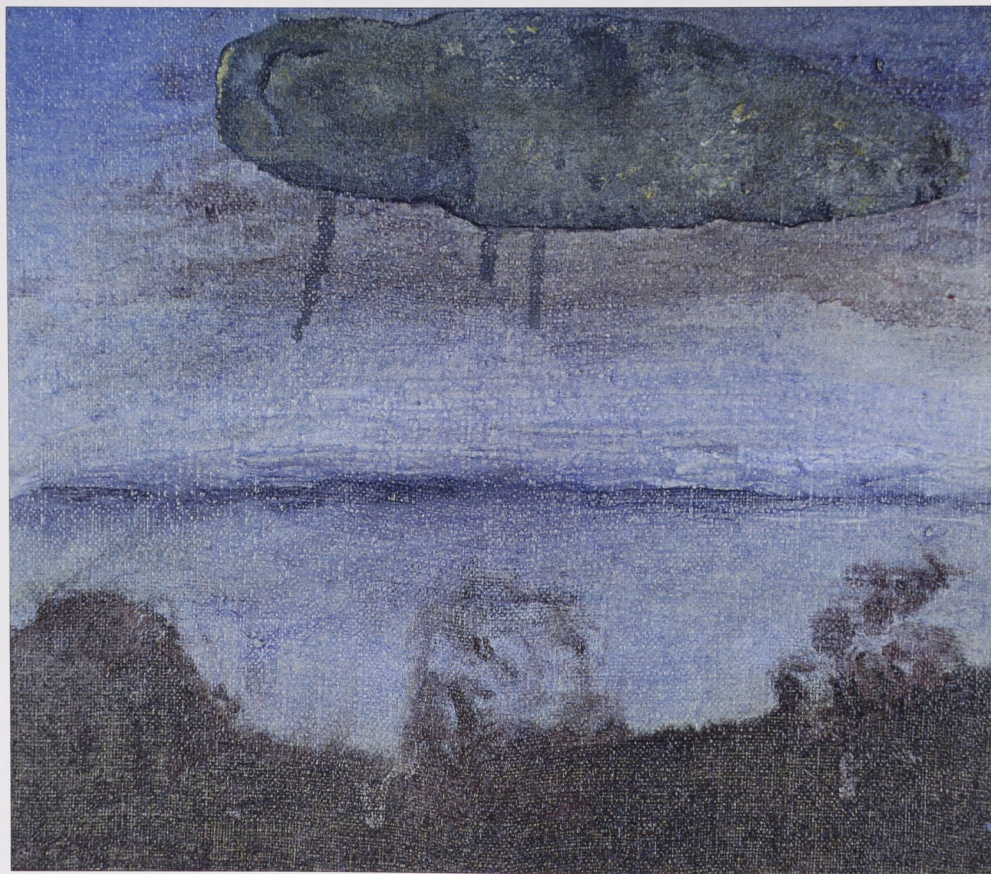
"Inland Sea to Fat Grazing Land"





'Algal Blooms In The Winter Mist'





'Where Lycett Sketched the Rocks Weep'

This pastime for myself has nothing to do with getting a suntan; it has to do with a sense of spaciousness, of infinite water and vast skies, of the unobtainability of the horizon (a childhood fascination of mine) of the wind coming from wherever it pleases, sometimes with such force that one feels weightless, of the marine lifeforms washed up along the water's edge, of the warmth of the sun radiating from white sand. This is nature which unable to be contained - so vast that it has no visible borders. There I have spent much of my time, to be alone; to find inspiration or solace. This seeking of release from stress and emotional tension, or a temporary cure for deep disillusionment with the offerings of the late twentieth century is one which many of us have inherited. We seek those intractable elements of nature - those that are left - as a source of deep inspiration or reassurance.

Being there to respond directly to the site became absolutely crucial, for a time. How else could I convey visually my own sense of responding to a place?

I spent the next three weeks (it was May) driving to and from the lake three days per week. The plein-air kit that I used was based upon convenience of size for the very cold conditions - a small sketchpad and a slightly larger watercolour block, some gouache paints, sumi-e and watercolour brushes, a saucer and a jar of water. These sketching trips were made to the same part of the lake at its south-western end, which was comparatively sheltered from the winds at that time of the year.

As I drove to the lake, I would turn off the car radio so that my eyes could become aware of the light, the sky, and the climactic conditions that day. Always, as I reached the ACT/NSW border of the Kings Highway which overlooks the Lake George basin from the crest of a hill, I would be visually surprised and inspired. Sometimes, the basin would be fogbound, and the lake would be completely invisible. Other days, mist would be rapidly evaporating, shrouding the view in a transparent, luminous veil of white. Any mystical illusions would be shattered, however, as I drove down the dirt road towards the lake, past a dusty bull stud on the left, and sand mines on the right. For several days the drive was marred by the corpse of a very large male kangaroo at the road's edge. He had been shot the previous night. One of his hind legs had been broken, and the buckled remainder of a car's spotlight lay near his head. I drove on, after stopping to think about this, to paint the birds by the lake's edge.

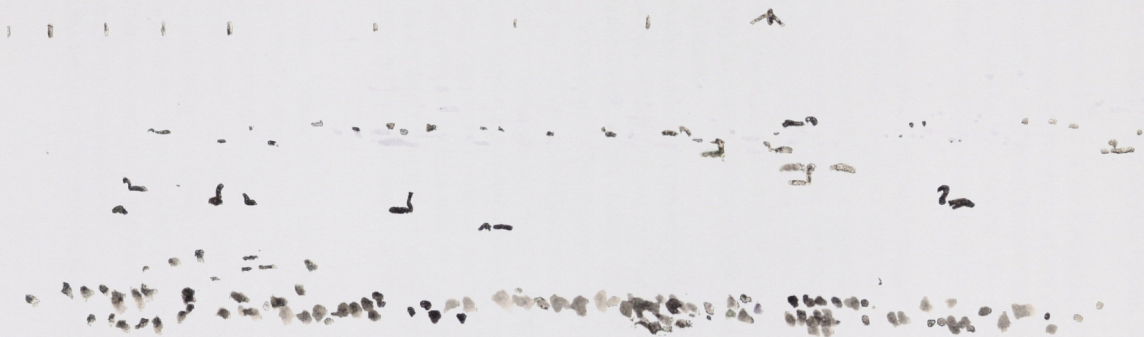
Here I made visual notations of the black swans and many species of ducks (at least two of which are an endangered species) as they nested in the shallow waters in long, ordered lines and groupings. I painted whatever interested me visually, responding repeatedly to the silhouetted shapes of the birds, which so resembled the notes of musical scores, in the mid-distance (if I ventured past the fences they would fly away). Acres of blackberries and scotch thistles commandeered the foreground, which I included in some works, where they assumed the role of our actions upon the landscape.

Sometimes I painted the pyramid-shapes of the manmade sandhills of Bungendore Sands on the eastern shore, which the late afternoon winter rays of the sunset would highlight golden against the otherwise sombre, muddy colours of the grassland around the lake.





Plein-air drawing. 1993.



Plein-air drawing. 1993



## BETWEEN PLEIN-AIR AND THE STUDIO

What occurs between the process of these meditative plein-air notations and the studio process is a significant aspect of the works. By referencing the plein-air drawings and my photographic documentation made on visits to the lake, I am still valuing that contemplative experience of **being there**.

Alongside the qualities in these paintings of the Romantic and the Sublime landscape of the nineteenth century which inculcated such notions as the vastness of nature, a moodiness of vision, an antique, preciousness of surface, subtle and pensive imagery\* I have made specific references to the indigenous life cycle of the waterbirds at the lake, not as zoological specimens, but as nesting populations, sometimes occurring in great quantities, and which are depicted only from a distance.

I respond initially very freely and intuitively to the prepared surface. After contemplating this gestural composition from a distance I begin to work into the painting a more formal (in the sense of figurative) structure. I have found that the compositional aesthetic elements which interest me have become so familiar that I am able to work with them with increasing freedom, so that the painting evolves for a period of its development without me knowing which way I may later introduce the other figurative elements - and their details, into the work. Sometimes paintings ended up being developed upside down or on their side, depending on which way I was most inspired by the movement of marks.

From this time on in the development of the painting, the position of my body in relation to the work oscillates between periods of half an hour spent quite close to the painting surface, where I work on minute details painted with a small brush, and periods of sitting back from the work negotiating its possibilities. Sometimes I find a solution to a work by catching my first glimpse of it as I enter the room and see it from an oblique view.

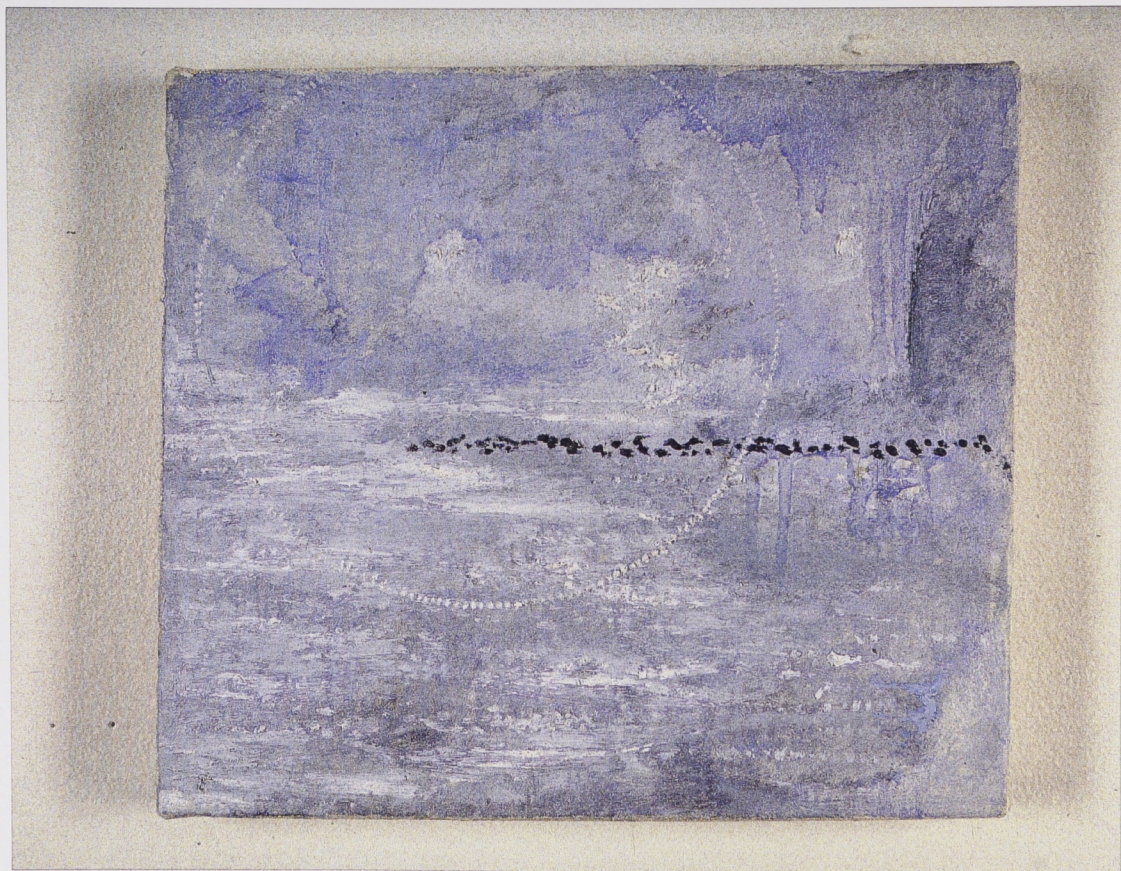
I am happy to paint in figurative elements, and then erase them if they do not satisfy me. I enjoy using a rag for this, sometimes rubbing dynamically marks which have taken half an hour to get "just right", particularly if they appear too static in the field of marks around them. I find that the rapid movement of my hand as it rubs imbues into the painting a sense of the wind, which is an aspect of the Lake George basin which I find quite theatrical.

\*See Grachos, Louis. *Romance & Irony in Recent American Art*. Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth. 1989.

### The 'Waterbird' Series

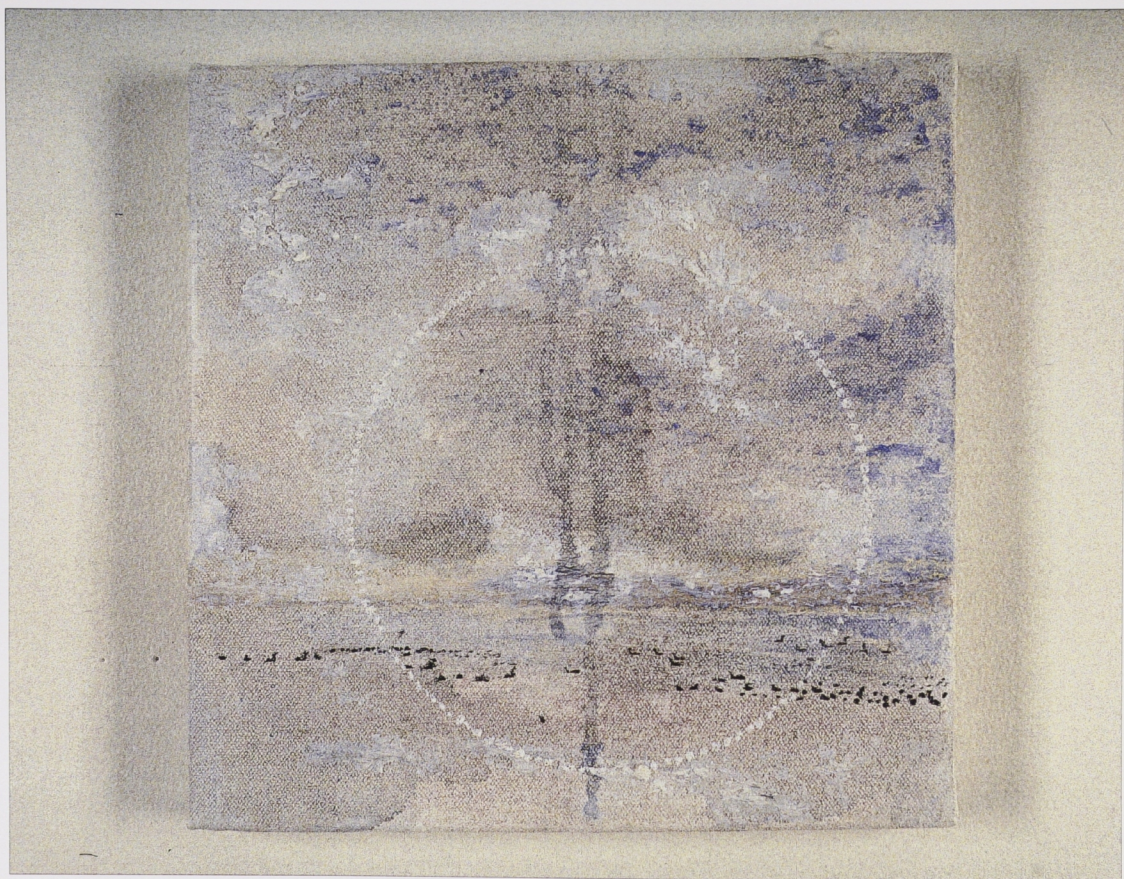
Most of the 'Waterbird Staccato - Winter' series were begun by painting calligraphic marks with a large brush, or by pouring small amounts of transparent oil washes and allowing them to filter into the surface slowly. I sometimes paint back into them very lightly, in order to create a sense of complex movement in the pigment (like the sedimentary layers of the lake bed). These initial gestural marks I use as the underlying composition of the paintings. Hence they evolve around and sometimes into them, with more layers of staining and pouring; so that there is a sense of the painterly qualities of the works becoming a metaphor for the qualities of the natural elements - water, air and earth - all dissolving into each other.

The figurative elements of the birds and the waterbound fencelines I introduce by responding to



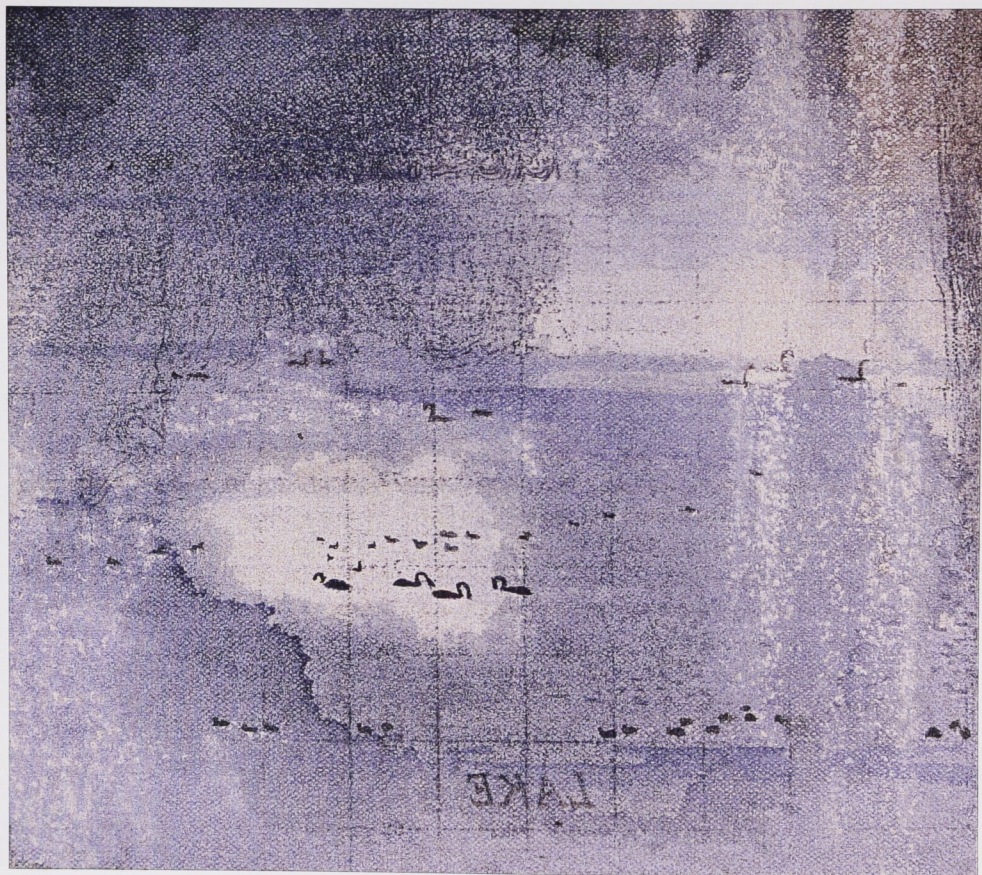
'Waterbird Staccato - Winter I'





'Waterbird Staccato - Winter II'





'Waterbird Staccato - Winter VII'





'Fugue'

the composition of transparent stains from a distance. For their arrangement, I refer to my plein-air series of drawings. In these minute figurations the waterbirds resemble the black dots of the same note in staccato from a Philip Glass operatic score. Hence the viewer, like myself, is invited to move closer in to the painting to read in more detail its rhythms.

After painting in the birds and fencelines, I will work back into the gestural field of staining with white impastoed paint, dragging the paint in long, swift movements across the surface. Sometimes the paint is dragged very delicately, so that it just and only just touches the surface. Then the brush reinforces the weave of the canvas, and the idea of fabric - a surface which has associations with, on the one hand, the decorative arts, but here used with another of its associations - that of the prepared surface used for paintings in the modern era. The first two of the 'Waterbird' series (No's I and II) were developed this way. Over these layers I then painted a circle, or part thereof, in impastoed white paint. These are painterly adaptations of the surveyors' circle, which I had seen in field books from some of the early surveys of the region.\* In these painted circles there is an exchange of languages, so that there is an intersection between scientific and poetic representation. Describing the circle in its (white) negative form so that it assumes the poetic qualities of the evaporating watery/misty stains of the background in these works allows for other readings of this precise mathematical device. Here, the association of geometry being imposed over the land as a scientific device becomes transposed into a device for poetic speculation, rather than as an overtly didactic device which only allows the viewer one reading.

Similarly, in the remainder of the 'Waterbird' series, parts of the map is used, as a poetic device which again reverses its traditional role. Here I have used part of a military map of the area which was subjected to magnification of scale by photocopying. The trigonometrical base on this map, known as North Base 2256, the minute, precisely engraved mark became a large ragged-edged triangle attached to a grid-line. In other works from this series, the map occurs as an intricately patterned veil created by the faded image of the map when the photocopy is transferred into the canvas, as in No. VII, or the impastoed white grid lines which appear suspended above the mist as in No. IV.

\* I have looked in these works to the watercolours of lakes and coastal views made by the English landscape painter, J.M.W. Turner, and both the sepia nature drawings and the North Sea paintings of the Pomeranian artist, Caspar David Friedrich. - The painting 'Fugue' alludes to Friedrich's works, where the grid and contour lines of a map descend from the top of the picture frame, imposing themselves upon the already theatrical, almost embalmed polish of the dark sky.

+ 'Fleulen: looking from Lake Lucerne' by J.M.W. Turner - from the catalogue *Turner Abroad*, Wilton, Andrew. British Museum Pub. London, 1982.

### The 'Bungendore Sands' Paintings

'Bungendore Sands I' and 'II' are views from the western escarpment, which depict the lake in the midground and the eastern hills beyond.

Both of these paintings originated from a visit to the southern end of the western escarpment, where I was taken by a local resident to find a site from where I could later paint.

This resident had participated with other residents in taking action with the local shire over the sand mines. From this part of the escarpment, the scarring of the earth's surface left by the sand mines is prominent in any view to the east. During a walk across two properties, I stopped





Fluelen: looking from Lake Lucerne 1845



to take a photograph of the view through the trees. Their canopy seemed to enclose this view in a Claudian frame.

In 'Bungendore Sands I' this Claudian frame became abstracted as dark brown transparent layers which I poured carefully to emulate the dark frame of the treeline. Whilst the French painter, Claude Lorrain's device enclosed idyllically Romantic views, here the frame encircles a view of the land's legacy left by indiscriminate mining.

The land's features is painted in minute detail, even down to the grazing cattle, which occur as tiny dots in the farmland of the foreground. I used Australian Red Gold as an undercolour in this area of the painting so that its warm hue, like the sepia washes of Dutch drawings, could filter through the overpainting, even in minute gaps.

'Bungendore Sands II' also originates from a photograph taken on the same afternoon. This painting I started by erasing some of a previous painting with which I was dissatisfied. The sky was described very simply by pouring carefully transparent blue wash over the areas of the pre-existing painting which I wanted to keep. The area of blue sky in the left-hand corner has part of a map layered behind this blue wash very subtly, apparent only upon close perusal.

The ratio of sky to earth in this painting is exaggerated to convey the operatic quality of the clouds. White and voluminous, their rapid movement casts the flat land of the lake into dark curving sweeps of Burnt Umber. Behind this shadow the sand mines are painted as contrasting pale, curiously inorganic shapes, which is just as they do appear. Visible from every view.

These marks may be read as a kind of calligraphy which conveys some of nature's chaos and fragility, its mystery, and the evaporating atmosphere of the lake.

### 'Transposition'

This work has six small panels, which began as three, and for a time became extended to nine panels.

Rather than use one long panel, this work uses a multi-panel format as a metaphor for the divisions of the lake bed, which occur as fencelines that stretch for miles across the water (in its wet years). Each set of two consecutive panels describes the same place - at different times.

The **central** two panels were originally part of a triptych which I had painted using photographs from my weeks spent watching and describing the waterbirds. In these panels, I wanted to use two pictorial elements - the straight fenceline and the noxious weeds of the foreground (blackberries and Scotch thistles) - as a counterbalance to the otherwise idyllic scene - which in reality they indeed were. These features are the by-product of sheep and cattle grazing, which occurs on much of the land surrounding the lake.

The two **left** panels represent this part of the lake when it is dry. The first of these panels has minimal notation, which emerge from two lines - the higher horizon line, straight and featureless, and the lower line, which has subtle intersections representing the grid of the map and fragments of that maps contour lines. These lower notations are developed into the noxious weeds of the foreground. Above them, the lake bed is dry and barren, save for a curious pond of water. Poll Hereford cattle graze on the dry lake bed. They are painted in a transparent layer of Australian



'Bungendore Sands I'



Red Gold - the only variation of the otherwise Burnt Umber transparent rendering on these two panels. I rubbed over some of the images in these panels in places to simulate the illusion of a dust storm.

The two panels on the **right** depict the lake with a storm looming at dusk. These panels are painted with the most dominant colours of the work. A golden sun casts its last light onto the lake. In these panels I allowed the paint to become more chaotic and theatrical, and at the outer edge of the work, the image disappears, enveloped into the density of the descending night. Into this dark veil of the night, I painted tiny white blurred dots representing electric lights on the hills of the horizon.

The simulation of storms occurs in each of these panels, a metaphor for the resistance of nature to our attempts to control it. Apart from the depiction of stormy, cloud-filled skies, I added transparent washes of blue down the edges of some panels to simulate sudden downpours of rain - again, alluding to the chaos and mutability of the elements.

There, the wind blows more often than not. When it arises suddenly, low lying clouds create rapidly moving deep shadows over the lake's surface and the hills. The lake's surface can change from a mirror-still blue, to a pewter-coloured expanse of chaotic waves. I have been there, drawing the birds on a calm May morning, when the shattering white of the voluminous clouds have suddenly been hidden by even larger dark grey rain clouds, which totally transform the surface and the colours of the lake.

My own fascination with particular colours to describe aspects of the environment dictates much of the outcome of these panels. For some years, I have been primarily interested in sepia and Chinese blue in the representation of nature. These colours were used not only by Chinese sumi-e artists in their representations of nature, but also by the northern European artists, from Albrecht Durer to the Dutch and Flemish landscape artists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by British and European artists who came to Australia.

I have looked again and again at northern (European) landscape drawings which seem, in their restraint of colour and the Baroque-ness of their figurative descriptions, to speak to me about how I respond to the land of the lake, its contours, its flatness, the colours of the earth and grasses, the lack of trees (save for the neat dark lines of introduced trees), and the vastness of sky. Into these qualities of colour and configuration I have layered elements of stitching, printing, mapping, and and painterly describing. Each of these devices interact in ways such that each may shed light upon the other.



(Detail) 'Transposition'



# CONCLUSION

What is my own relationship is to nature, and how I may represent this? How have I inherited these ideas and particular interests, and what do I respond to in nature? These are questions which I have reflected on through the processes of making these paintings and discussing the historical documents of my Sub-Thesis. During the course of the project, I have found myself more prepared to value aspects of historical traditions of representing the natural world - that meditative, reflective relationship to nature, and the desire to celebrate this. I remain, nonetheless, still concerned that my paintings be viewed as more than passive contemplations, and that a critical engagement with the subject from a contemporary standpoint will be also evident in the work. Our culture's desire has been to fix information about a place in order to hold it and contain it. This particular place has been particularly unfixable and elusive. Both my sub-thesis and my paintings celebrate that intractability, and the impossibility of containing its elemental mutability. Who knows what entrepreneurial "get-rich-quick" follies they will try to impose upon it next?

GRADUATE DIPLOMA - STUDIO PRACTICE PROPOSAL  
CHRISTINE JAMES

As the Studio Practice component of my Graduate Diploma, I propose to develop a body of visual works which derive from the local site of Lake George.

Whilst I have based the past year of my studio practice in Graphic Investigation to the environmental history of this site since its White discovery (in 1820), there is still a whole realm of information relating to Lake George which I wish to explore visually through my work. This information falls into three categories:

1. scientific investigation of Lake George, particularly during the last twenty years
2. Lake George, or Weeriwaa - what it still signifies to its original inhabitants - the Ngunnawal people
3. my own documentation of Lake George which I intend making from visits to various leasehold properties that border its shores

I anticipate using a variety of media and a variety of methods of image making. I am presently interested in developing my understanding of gesso as a surface, and I would like to explore gesso as a textured, calligraphic surface upon which the flatness of gouache is juxtaposed with the sheen and texture of layered oil paint.

I am also interested in developing the use of my own photographic documentation as a basis for visual works - perhaps using transfer prints as the beginning and also the subject matter of drawings or paintings.



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# **Christine James.**

## **PERSONAL DETAILS**

Date of Birth: 10th March, 1953.  
Place of Birth: Casino, NSW.  
Residential Address: 9 Booroondara St.,  
Reid. 2601, ACT.  
Phone: (06)2471496.

## **EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS**

1993-4 Candidate for Graduate Diploma in Arts. Canberra School of Art, Institute of the Arts, Australian National University.  
1992 Bachelor of Arts (Visual) - Graphic Investigation Workshop, Canberra School of Art, ANU.  
1987 Diploma of Arts - Painting. Queensland College of Art, Morningside, Brisbane.  
1971 Year 1 - Associate Diploma of Art, Queensland College of Art, George St., Brisbane.

## **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

1994 Five New Artists, Beaver Galleries, Deakin, ACT.  
1992 Carapace 1 - The Spiral Arm Gallery, Leichhardt St., Kingston, with Anna Eggert, Barb Smith, Henry Price, Janet Meaney and Janet Garcia.  
Revolution in the White Palace - Graduate Show, Canberra School of Art Gallery.  
1990 Institut d'Arts Visuels, Orleans, France - Graphic Investigation Workshop  
Exposition.  
1989 Canberra School of Art, Library Foyer - Artist - Book Exhibition - "Some Insecta"  
1988 Studio One Workshop Exhibition, Woden Library Foyer.  
1985 Brisbane City Hall Gallery, Brisbane, Qld. Graduate Show - Painting Department, Queensland College of Art.  
Queensland College of Art, Administration Foyer - Open Day Exhibition.

## **SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS**

1992 Lake George - A Survey. Graduate Show, Canberra School of Art.  
1986 Casey Galleries, Woollahra, Sydney.

## **COLLECTIONS**

1992 Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies Collection, CRES Centre, Australian National University.  
1994 Artbank.



## **PUBLICATIONS (BY)**

- 1992 CARAPACE 1 & 2 Catalogue Essay.
- 1990 SITES UNSEEN 1& 2 Catalogue Essay. (Artists - Vicent Butron, Diana Boyer, Sue Lovegrove, Janet Shanks, Maria Cruz, Janet Garcia Coleman, Caroline Jervis and Kate Mackay. Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Gallery 3.  
Canberra Contemporary Art Space Newsletter, No. 13 - Press Release for Sites Unseen 1 & 2 (compiled by Brenda Kelly and eX de Medici.)

## **PUBLICATIONS (ON)**

- 1994 Congregation for the Conferring of Degrees and Diplomas. Australian National University - see cover, "Survey/Surveyed/Surveillance" (detail). Photograph by Peter Millett, National Capital Printing, Fyshwick.
- 1993 National Graduate, Winter 1993. (a magazine for the convocation of The Australian National University) Lake George: Paintings and Prose from a Fragmented Past. - by Alison Munro. p. 14.  
The Australian National University Annual Report, 1992 - see cover, "Survey/Surveyed/ Surveillance" (detail) Photograph by Peter Millett, Pirie Printers.
- 1993 The Australian National University Vice-Chancellor's Christmas card - "Survey/Surveyed/Surveillance" (detail) Photograph by Peter Millett, Pirie Printers.
- 1992 Anarchy makes for fresh change - by Sasha Grishin, The Canberra Times, September 1992.
- 1985 Queensland College of Art Gallery Poster - Exhibition Program July 1985 - November 1985 - "Bend in the River".

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their contribution to my work during the course of this project:

Nigel Lendon and Ingo Kleinert for their incisive observations during the reviews, and for their encouragement and support.

Robert Boynes and Ruth Waller for their suggestions, support and encouragement.

Gordon Bull for his enduring patience, and for guiding me towards a more creative approach to writing.

Other post-graduate students for their support and sense of humour during the tough times - especially Anne Brennan, Sharon Peoples, and Lizzy Paterson.

Peter Hughes and Crispin Ackerman, who made the stretchers for many of my works.

Noel Ford, for his suggestions with pigments, and his recipes for paint mediums and surface preparations.

Robert Cleworth, who I watched for many weeks caressing the edges of lines and other pictorial features until they were exactly right. From Robert, I learned a lot about imbuing my own poetic sensibility into a work.

Anna Eggert - artist, friend, fellow mother; and Paul Eggert - writer, editor, lover of old engraved maps, - for sharing of ideas, support and encouragement.

McComas Taylor of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, ANU, for his information on black swans, and the extinction (by 1860) of the emu in this region.

The residents who live around the southern end of Lake George who allowed me to traverse their properties when I was looking for places to work from - especially the Osborne family, Martin Pickler, and Lois Sims, who wakes up to see the swans and ducks every (clear) day.

Jim Neale from the Department of Biogeography, ANU, who took Leah MacKinnon and I to the midden on the property, Weeriwa.

The Department of Cartography, ANU, for permission to reproduce parts of their maps of Lake George.

Geoffrey James, my friend and husband, for his support, encouragement, for his generous assistance with the computer and wise suggestions when I was having difficulties.

All the other people who work for the care of our environment - you inspire me.